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# To Name a Thing: Painting Liminal Space

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Washington University in St. Louis  
Graduate School of Art

# To Name a Thing:

## Painting Liminal Space

Chloe West

A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University  
in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts

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*The incapacity to name is a good system of disturbance.*  
-Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida

## Liminal (adjective)

of, relating to, or situated at a sensory threshold: barely perceptible or capable of eliciting a response.

of, relating to, or being an intermediate state, phase, or condition: in-between, transitional.

Between or belonging to two different places, states, etc.:

*The liminal state between waking and sleeping.*

Relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process.

Occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.

## Abstract

My work and this thesis engage in the language of fragmentation, the everyday, and liminality. I create work that both depicts and becomes liminal space, I am interested in the in-between, the indistinct. My paintings reside in an intermediate stage between representation and abstraction, embodiments of everyday surfaces and objects of banality: I look at the periphery. The work comes from a distinct awareness of the body in space and the gaze. I turn my gaze to the materials of liminal space: the threshold of linoleum tiles, the boundary of a window. The surfaces that I represent speak to space that is fragmented and bodies that are displaced. I look to Roland Barthes, Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and Helen Scalway to put words to the inexpressible state of liminality. I discuss artists who share my conceptual concerns relating to the everyday, objects and bodies in space, the window and light, and formal painting inquiries, such as Gerhard Richter, Ellsworth Kelly, Silvia Plimack Mangold, Agnes Martin, and Robert Gober. My work and this thesis do not attempt to explain or to define, but both reside in a liminal state of belonging and un-belonging. What follows is, as Roland Barthes puts it, “A dictionary not of definitions but of twinklings {*scintillations*}.”

## The Looker

My curiosity as an artist stems from my life as a looker. In becoming an artist, I have come to understand that, for me, making art is learning how to see. My eyes grow wider: always looking. I am searching to understand the world around me, my place in it, and the intricacies of being a person in the world making art. My observation leads me to make representational work: looking closely at something to understand it, to see it, to en flesh it. To think on it slowly, at the pace of my hand. My intense looking does not yield a perfect simulation; I will not (and cannot) deny my hand and my eyes their imperfection. My observation leads to an utterly human desire for my hand to create a perfect object.

This thesis engages in a discussion of looking at the inert, the incidental, and the marginal through the intimate and laborious act of painting. My work is centered on the study of painting through observation and representational imagery. I make highly detailed paintings of mundane objects and spaces that surround us in the built environment: questioning material culture, reproduction, and the politics of private and public space. By employing devices of illusionism and abstraction, I question the frame as a window into another world. I pull imagery from my surroundings, painting objects and spaces primarily from my home and studio to explore the role that everyday objects play in constructing personal and collective identity. By arduously transforming banal and mass-produced objects into paintings, I change the form and meaning: the liminal becomes intimate and the general becomes specific. By enfleshing the surface of a manufactured skin through the material qualities of paint and the intimate act of looking, the subject that first appears universal becomes personal.

## The Other

*“The body is a situation.”*

*-Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex*

My relationship to looking and the gaze is connected to the body as a sight/site (the body as an object of looking and as a place, a situation from which to look). John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* discusses the topic of looking; here, he writes of the internalized gaze and looking at gendered bodies: “...Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.”<sup>i</sup> While his language is somewhat dated today, he discusses eloquently the ways in which a gendered person sees and is seen as a body, an object, a sight. My life as a looker and as a gendered body leads me to make paintings that implicate the viewer as voyeur but deny their gaze. The window remains closed, the action is impeded, the sight is not seen.

I roam, looking, observing, uncomfortable when eyes are turned to me. I prefer to be the onlooker, the flaneuse, the “woman drifter.”<sup>ii</sup> I find comfort in invisibility; I “walk on the margin,”<sup>iii</sup> working in limitation, creating an inaccessible space that gives away little information

and denies entry, the painting acts as a screen. I create a space that is about the gaze: both mine and the viewer's. My painting is cautious in its reveal, seemingly aware of the gaze, steeped in their privacy, they are unwilling to share.

*"I don't find people in the street to be 'crowd' or 'spectacle'. Seeking to create a space for looking, and voyeurism, are surely very different activities."*

*—Helen Scalway, The Contemporary Flaneuse*

## Bodies in Space

*“Spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body.”*

-Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

### *The Subject*

How do bodies learn to exist in space? By this I mean, how does the mere physicality of bodies and the place they live in lead people to navigate the world and how do we become subjects of this world? I refer to real bodies in real space, asking the seemingly simple question of how bodies move through space and why.

How do we inhabit our bodies? Lived experience informs the body through identity politics, culture, race, gender, ethnicity, class, etc. - signifiers that are inescapably attached to bodies. The collective experience of one's life is imprinted on the body: "...spaces 'impress' on the body, involving the mark of unfamiliar impressions, which in turn reshapes the body surface."<sup>iv</sup> The way we inhabit our bodies is due to how we live in the world; the internal and external are inextricable. All bodies suffer from some form of subjectivity, categorization, naturalization: burdensome definitions that affect how they are able to move through the world. This othering leads to the acute awareness of one's identity: being overly conscious of one's body in public space, how one is perceived, and how one should proceed in order to remain safe (neutral, invisible). The subject of looking becomes central as we look at others in public space and as we feel ourselves being looked at and what those looks entail.

How do bodies inhabit space? Sara Ahmed discusses the orientation and inhabitation of the body through phenomenology: "...phenomenology makes 'orientation' central in the very argument that consciousness is always directed 'toward' an object, and given its emphasis on the lived experience of inhabiting a body...the 'lived body.' Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds."<sup>v</sup> Our bodies are shaped by the world and in turn our bodies shape the way we navigate the world. One's body and world is shaped by daily life, habits, rituals that reflect what is around and available to that person.

We are "always-already"<sup>vi</sup> subjects. We are subjected to an identity that will shape our path through life the second we are born, assigned a gender, and given a name. The question becomes: how can we de-subjectivize ourselves? How can we recognize ourselves outside of ideologies and become individuals? How can we create a world where we are allowed to roam free from subjectivity?<sup>vii</sup>

What I seek is a way to live as a body in space that is unburdened by the consequences of oppressive ideologies that create the other. I want to live in the space in-between, the neutral. Barthes speaks of the desire for neutrality, an impossible and indefinable position: "I define the



Neutral as that which outplays the paradigm, or rather I call the Neutral everything that baffles the paradigm, For I am not trying to define a word; I am trying to name a thing.”<sup>viii</sup>

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler speaks of neutralized subjectivity and freedom from oppressive ideologies that perpetuate binaries:

The dogged effort to “denaturalize” gender in this text emerges, I think, from a strong desire both to counter the normative violence implied by ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions about natural or presumptive heterosexuality that are informed by ordinary and academic discourses on sexuality. The writing of this denaturalization was not done simply out of a desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics in the place of “real” politics, as some critics have conjectured (as if theatre and politics are always distinct). It was done from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such.<sup>ix</sup>

Both Butler and Barthes attempt to describe a situation of being that is unclassified, resists subjectivity, and offers in-distinction.

I desire the Neutral, denaturalization, flow: “I want to live according to nuance.”<sup>x</sup>

*“I hear only the background buzz of our trying to explain something to each other, to ourselves, about our lived experience thus far on this peeled, endangered planet. As is so often the case, the intensity of our need to be understood distorted our position, backed us further into the cage.”*

-Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*

## *The Gendered/Sexed Body*

There are innumerable ways bodies are subjectivized in space. For my purposes, I will focus on the gendered and sexed body. Butler discusses the body as “marked” by sex and gender, an object on which meanings are imprinted upon: “To what extent does the body come into being in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will?”<sup>xvi</sup> How do we free our bodies from the “conditioned experience” that is set out by the binary hegemony? How can a body act as more than a passive object on which gender and sex is forced? How do we live as active bodies that resist repressive power systems?<sup>xvii</sup>

Butler discusses opposing theories of the subject of the Woman through Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray: “In opposition to Beauvoir, for whom women are designated as the Other, Irigaray argues that both the subject and the Other are masculine mainstays of a closed phallogocentric signifying economy that achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether.”<sup>xviii</sup> Either, the Woman is the “Other,” or the woman is complete absence. In both understandings, the woman is subjectivized through the body, “the subject that is not one.”<sup>xix</sup> For Beauvoir, the Woman is “marked”; for Irigaray, the woman is “canceled.”<sup>xx</sup> The woman is eclipsed by man. The boundaries of Woman are defined and limited.

Walter Benjamin writes of the flaneur, the borderless wanderer of the modern city street, the “dreaming idler”: “the man who feels himself viewed by all and sundry as a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man.”<sup>xxi</sup> The wanderer is, of course, male, as a woman walking the streets, idly, with no direction, no mission, endangers her person: “Outsider/insider is a border the would-be flaneuse must skirmish on constantly, if only with herself.”<sup>xxii</sup> His boundaries are unlimited; her boundaries are prescribed. Although this discourse of the flaneur is amidst modernization of the nineteenth century, the fact that space is gendered remains as Helen Scalway writes in *The Contemporary Flaneuse*:

The Baudelaireian flaneur, an isolated and even alienated figure, looks to assuage a sense of lack, by losing himself, (interesting phrase), in the crowd’s larger life. But for the female stroller, whose marginalisation is not freely chosen but a given of the situation, the creation of the path, a space to walk at all, is what matters. I start from a position which is a long way from either losing or finding myself in the crowd.... Already it seems to me that I’m necessarily practising something which runs absolutely counter to any of the meanings we usually attach to the word ‘flanerie.’<sup>xxiii</sup>

A situation of flanerie does not exist for all bodies. Public space is othering, and othered bodies have differing levels of access to space, unable to move through space freely, idly. The way a body moves through space is at least partially due to the sexed and gendered body. Moving through space involves “a threading between the ill defined edges of more ambivalent territories of belonging and not belonging. Being critical of what belonging entails; yet needing to belong; and being unable fully to do so.”<sup>xxiv</sup>

## *Orientations*

*“To live is to leave traces.”*

-Walter Benjamin, Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century

Being aware of one's body in space leads to specific orientations of the body in space, orientation “depends on the bodily inhabitation of that space.”<sup>xx</sup> How does the body interact in space, being situated towards or away from certain objects? Being subjectivized as an other causes the body to direct itself in different ways than other bodies. Orientation is how the body resides in space.<sup>xxi</sup>

The signified body creates a way of inhabiting space. Ways of navigating space are learned through lived experience, identity informing our habitual motions. One cannot walk the streets without the weight of identity informing how they move through space, how they are perceived, and how they feel in that space. “...orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as “who” or “what” we direct our energy and attention toward.”<sup>xxii</sup> Orientation in space is directed by our signified bodies which lead individuals to turn towards and away from different objects, spaces, people.

How we exist in space has to do with how we have learned is best to deal with “trouble”: “The subtle ruse of power: the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.”<sup>xxiii</sup> My paintings are about access to and inaccessibility of space, learned bodily relations to space and trouble.

In a series of photographic works, *She/Self*, I documented my body in movement (see Fig. 1). Using my background in dance, I enacted a performance that takes place in a solitary domestic space, solely for the gaze of the camera. The role of performance and looking is moved into the private sphere and my body is oriented towards the camera and the space of my home. As my body moves through space, my flesh overlaps, is interrupted by light, erased. The work discusses the photographed female nude performance and orientations of the body in private space for the public gaze. The discussion of interiority continues in my current work.

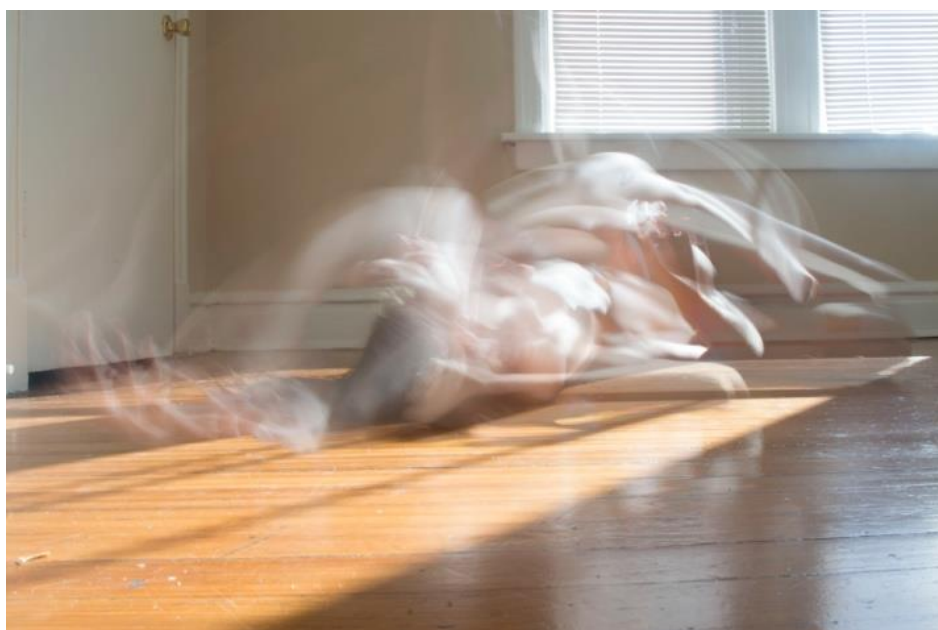


Fig. 1  
Chloe West  
*She/Self I, II*, 2015  
Archival Inkjet Print  
17 x 24 in. each  
From the artist

## *Objects*

*"I want to see what I can see. But I also want to see what, in the city, acknowledges me."  
-Helen Scalway, The Contemporary Flaneuse*

How do bodies orient themselves toward or away from objects? What objects? Who faces what? And what faces who? "If consciousness is about how we perceive the world "around" us, then consciousness is also embodied, sensitive, and situated. This...can also help show us how bodies are directed in some ways and not others, as a way of inhabiting or dwelling in the world."<sup>xxiv</sup> How does lived experience give certain objects meaning? We are situated and directed towards particular objects and spaces based on our identity, experience, and work.

In thinking through the body, space, and objects a body of work emerged: small paintings of close views of various body parts, furniture in my apartment, mundane objects of everyday life. The paintings, titled *Sequence I*, are shown together creating a nonlinear, disjunctive narrative that links the body, orientations, and objects (see figure 2). The collection of paintings portrays the everyday and anything, the intimate and arbitrary, all with scrutiny to the treatments of surface between the body and objects. A close view of inert objects and a disconnected view of the body creates a contradictory point of view, both mine and the camera's. The amalgamation of images, scaling, palette, and style is fragmented; meanings remain unfixed and changing.

*"...if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing! Alas, I am doomed by (well-meaning) Photography always to have an expression, my body never finds its zero degree, no one can give it to me."  
-Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida*

The linear sequence indicates a film strip, a narrative to be read. But as the paintings unfold, no successive or clear narrative is found. Each painting focuses on one object; they are singular, specific, small, and imperfect. The small scale portrays objects at or much smaller than human scale. Paintings of my body, artifacts, and surroundings create a constructed, incomplete self-portrait; they are as ambiguous as they are specific, images that are both detailed and absent. The thin panels act as mirrors, whether the subject is a body part or an object, and through layers of identification and misrecognition different ways of looking become important, the tangibility of the body and memory becomes convoluted.



Fig. 2  
Chloe West  
*Sequence I*, 2016  
Oil on panel  
8 x 10 in. each  
From the artist

## *The Working Body*

The body also relates to spaces and objects through work. The laboring body orients itself specifically towards objects of its labor, “the furniture that frame any intellectual labor.”<sup>xxv</sup> The work of my body is painting; my body orients itself towards a canvas, and the labor involved has created a codified language, a dance. As a practicing dancer, I attune my attention to the body and its movements, learning the codified language of my body in space. As I become fully oriented to the canvas, my awareness of my body is heightened, space falls away – there exists only the few inches between me and the canvas: “*It is from here that the world unfolds.*”<sup>xxvi</sup>

Althusser discussed subjectivity through the laboring body and the conditions of reproduction in capitalist society. Production calls for reproduction: reproduction calls for labor: labor calls for bodies. Bodies learn how to become laboring bodies through the ideologies that teach them to be obedient to the labor power. This obedience to production and reproduction creates the subjectivized body of labor.<sup>xxvii</sup> My repetitive paintings require obedience and I learn how to manufacture them. By painting mundane and manufactured materials, I nod to the subjectivity of the labored body and the function of labor and reproducibility in our capitalist society. My paintings describe aspects of banal material culture, surfaces, and textures that are found in both private and public space. These surfaces are a part of the manufactured environment, creating indifferent, generic places. The sense of privacy and possession is fragmented; the sense of boundary and exclusion is heightened. (I work; therefore, I am.) “Only someone who has lived in the streets of a city, suffering some kind of misery, can be aware of what the paving stones, the doorways, the bricks, the windows signify. At street level - outside a vehicle – all modern cities are violent and tragic.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

In thinking about reproduction and labor, I began painting the linoleum tiles of my studio, school buildings, and institutional spaces. The paintings are 12” x 12,” the exact size of the actual tiles and are displayed on the floor. In the studio, the paintings sit on the tiles that they depict, when removed from the studio and placed in the gallery setting, they still act as tiles removed from their surroundings. The scaling of the paintings the same as the subject existing in reality questions pictorial space and the painting as a sculptural object. I began to reproduce objects that were also reproduced. I found that I do not want to erase my painterly hand, nor was I capable of creating a simulation of the tiles. Although there is an element of copying, the paintings are by no means replicas of the tiles. They remain human, imperfect, and of the body. My piece “Linoleum with Fluorescents” is comprised of four 12” x 12” panels that assemble a square (see figure 3). The paltry green-gray surface of the linoleum is interrupted by the bright reflections from fluorescent light tubes overhead. I am questioning how the paintings operate as objects and how those objects live in the world as they interact with other elements.

Robert Gober’s sculptures of inert objects are tenderly reproduced by hand in sometimes awkward, imperfect ways (see figure 4). He also reproduces by hand such objects that are reproduced in mass. They both are and are not the thing they represent: “*Why* art had to be autonomous we as a culture can no longer remember...Art could not point to or represent things; it had to be something-period. This separation of *being* and *representing* was itself an odd cul-de-sac in the history of modernism...as if the two things could ever really be separate.”<sup>xxix</sup> Gober’s sculptures represent a sink and become a sink: both a depiction and an object, but

uncannily disconnected from its place in everyday life. Both Gober's and my works are misfit: labored objects from every day that are imperfect, displaced, and absent.



Fig. 3  
Chloe West  
*Linoleum with Fluorescents*, 2017  
Oil on panel  
Four 12 x 12 in. panels  
From the artist



Fig. 4  
Robert Gober  
*Untitled (Sink)*, 1984  
Plaster, wood, wire lath, aluminum, watercolor, enamel paint  
27 1/2 x 33 x 22 in.  
From: The Museum of Modern Art, moma.org

## Wyoming

I grew up in Wyoming amongst vast plains and big skies. Wyoming is predominantly about the exterior, only when I moved to a city did I come to think about the interior and the fragmentation of space. Wyoming is a place that is largely colorless, made up of the light tans of dead grass, neutral violet of beetle kill pine trees, subtle green of sage, and clear blue sky – colors that play a large part in my palette. Wyoming has a quality of stillness that I have yet to experience elsewhere, not just the isolated quietness and the crisp, dry air but a calm, slow, endlessness.

I lived in Laramie, WY for college, a quiet and small town marked with the tragedy of the murder of Matthew Shepard in 1998, a young gay man. Living in Laramie as a queer person led me to be acutely aware of my access to public space, where my body could orient itself, how I negotiated through space, and how others negotiated around me.



## The Window

### *Room with No View*

In my profession as a painter, my life of a looker, and my identity, the gaze is all around me. The window is the object that I face and that faces me; it carries a social and personal form. The ideas of looking and the gaze, the politics of public and private space, and the scrutiny of the body in space led me to make the window paintings. The window is the site of looking, a portal between interiority and exteriority, a frame between public and private space. The window is not a banal object, but one charged with meaning that is both political and personal: “The windows disclose what is inside their buildings. Only disclose is the wrong word, for it suggests that before the disclosure, there was a secret. The windows present the life of lives of their building. They present their interiors in such a way as to show that they never were interiors. Nothing has an interior. Everything is exteriority. The whole city, in this way, is like an eviscerated animal.”<sup>xxx</sup> There is no interior, no private space. The window of the city home fractures and convolutes the sense of interiority and exteriority.

The window is the object of painting for me, engaged in my most fundamental questions in painting of looking and light: “...the window, by virtue of its flatness, its frame, the grid-like structure of its panes, and its transparency, is predestined like few other motifs for fundamental reflection on the image and the process of seeing.”<sup>xxxi</sup> The paintings come from photographs of venetian blinds in my apartment. I use the photo as a reference to a naturally occurring light situation, but the paintings are not depictions, they live somewhere between representation and abstraction. They are devoid of the frame of the window, the holes with strings threading through, or the mechanisms that open and close the window. The paintings are all-over compositions of horizontally running repeated lines. Each stripe indicates a strip of a blind that has its own gradation of color. The graduated stripes show a specific light situation, but remain very flat. There is no space, no air; creating a flat skin on the surface of the painting, making the structure (the body) of the painting obvious. They are clearly objects and not illusions. The excessive repetition, lack of a focal point, suffocating composition, and compressed space create a sense of anxiety. Although they are somewhat quiet paintings and are not highly chromatic, the near-extreme lack of design principles makes them unsettling. They perplexingly give too much and too little at once (impenetrable bars). They are uneasy, riding between classifications, attempting to baffle the paradigm, wanting to live in the flicker of the neutral.

My inclinations towards invisibility, marginality, neutrality, privacy are gendered and queer.

Beatriz Colomina discusses Adolf Loos’ architecture of the Moller House and his use of windows as a means to redirect the body and the gaze to the interior. Loos used windows only as light sources, obscuring the view to the outside with curtains, opaque glass, and even placing mirrors behind them. The interior is completely severed from the exterior: “The inhabitants of Loos’ houses are both actors in and spectators of the family scene - involved in, yet detached from, their own space. The classical distinction between inside and outside, private and public, object and subject, become convoluted.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Due to this trapped interior, the body and the gaze become detached from space. My works function similarly: to redirect the gaze and displace the body through enclosed interiority.

## *The Window in Art*

The history of windows in painting is, of course, a long one and a continuing one. The famous quote of Leon Battista Alberti from his 1435 treatise *De Pictura* reads "...on the surface on which I am going to paint, I draw a rectangle whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen."<sup>xxxiii</sup> This method of painting an illusion of reality remained more or less the same until the late nineteenth century when the subject was tackled by Impressionists, Modernists, and many after.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The window remains an interesting and evolving topic: "...images [of windows] attest to an enduring work on visual problems situated in the zones between representational and abstract painting, between the visual space and the surface, between the excerpt and the whole, opening and closing, and image and object."<sup>xxxv</sup> <sup>1</sup>

Gerhard Richter's *Window Grid* paintings deal with the window both as an illusionistic image and as a flat surface (see figure 5). The flat white bars reflect shadows on the flat shade behind them, repeating the grid and creating the illusion of depth. The windows are the size of the canvases: the paintings nearly become windows. Instead of an "open window through which the subject to be painted is seen," the window itself becomes the subject. Richter says of these paintings: "Perhaps the Doors, Curtains, Surface Pictures, Panes of Glass, etc. are metaphors of despair, prompted by the dilemma that our sense of sight causes us to apprehend things, but at the same time restricts and partly precludes our apprehensions of reality."<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Ellsworth Kelly's windows are flat planes of tone and color interrupted by dark bars (see figure 6). Kelly does not deny the flatness of the surface through illusion, instead creates a minimal abstraction of the window: "Kelly's path [through the window motif] led from illusionist representation to the analysis of the seen, to the construction of form, and thus from the painting to the relief and the object."<sup>xxxvii</sup> I utilize both Richter's and Kelly's approach to painting the window that is both about representation and abstraction, surface and object, the window as subject and situation.

Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* is a miniature French window with black leather covering the panes of glass (see figure 7). This sculptural object rejects previous ideas about painting and illusionism. The black panes read like a night sky from a distance, but upon closer inspection, they reveal themselves to be opaque, blocking the view in or out. Not only does Duchamp reject illusionism by bringing the window back into the world of real space and object-hood, he denies the gaze.

My approach the window painting is through representations of venetian blinds as a window covering (see figure 8). The repetitious veil speaks to languages of depiction as well as abstraction through the all-over composition which is self-conscious of the frame of the painting. Illusionistic space is denied, and the object of the painting becomes important. All of these windows confront the history of windows in art by using the window as the subject, rejecting expectations of deep illusionistic space, foregoing narrative, and denying the viewers gaze. The

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be mentioned the particular relationship of women to windows in art: the idle, waiting woman (anxious interior, gendered space).

window is a border between public and private, when closed it enforces a boundary, a liminal space of impeded sight.

My blinds are a view from the inside looking out, positioning the viewer in an interior. The viewer is confronted with a window that they cannot look through, the interior is imposing, hindering sight or exit (trapping). Through the installation and curation of my works, they create a constructed and disconnected sense of place. The works act as fixtures of the interior in real space which the viewer navigates through. They are not only paintings on the wall, but hint at real objects in real space. The viewer has to negotiate this space, conscious of their bodies in relation to paintings that live on the wall and on the floor. The paintings create an anxious interior.

*March 3, 2017*

I looked through a window that seemed many stories above where I stood on the sidewalk. I could see the ceiling of the apartment and the walls warped in a way that I could see into the apartment at impossible angles. I saw a person walking, undressed, and pick something up off the floor. It was me and the apartment was mine. I was the surveyor and the surveyed.

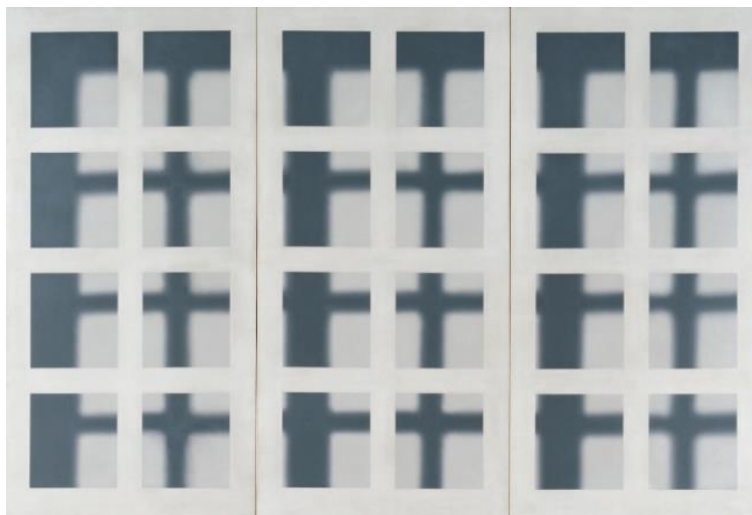


Fig. 5  
Gerhard Richter  
*Fenstergitter Window Grid*  
Oil on canvas  
200 cm x 300 cm  
From Gerhard-Richter.com



Fig. 6  
Ellsworth Kelly  
*Window*, 1949  
Oil on wood and canvas  
128.3 x 49.5 cm  
From Centre Pompidou



Fig. 7  
 Marcel Duchamp  
*Fresh Widow*, 1920  
 Miniature French window, painted wood frame,  
 and panes of glass covered with black leather  
 30 1/2 x 17 5/8 in. on wood sill 3/4 x 21 x 4 in.  
 From National Gallery of Art, [nga.gov](http://nga.gov)



Fig. 8  
 Chloe West  
*Blinds*, 2017  
 Oil paint on canvas  
 36 x 54 in.  
 From the artist

## Color (Colorlessness)

My sensibility is that of minor variance, subtlety, the inexplicit: limited color palette, limited compositional variation, limited imagery, limited gesture. My color palette tends towards muted colors: pure, saturated color is nonexistent in my paintings. I lean towards tonal painting, not true monochromes or grisailles but an exercise in deference (neutrality).

*“The grisaille... ‘color of the colorless.’ The monochrome (the Neutral) substitutes for the idea of opposition that of the slight difference, of the onset, of the effort toward difference, in other words, of nuance: nuance becomes a principle of all over organization that in a way skips the paradigm: this integrally all almost exhaustively nuanced space is the shimmer: the Neutral is the shimmer: that whose aspect, perhaps whose meaning is subtly modified according to the angle of the subject’s gaze.”*

*-Roland Barthes, The Neutral*

### *The Veil of Grisaille*

In her lecture “Grisaille as a Liminal Mode in Early Netherlandish Painting,” Lynn F. Jacobs discusses colorlessness in painting. Grisaille was used in early Netherlandish altar piece paintings on the outside of the hinged doors, the inside was painted in full color. This contrast between exterior and interior denotes the grisaille as a liminal space, color as a marker of holiness. The exterior is a liminal, transitional phase between the viewer and the interior, holy space of the altar piece. The viewer had to be prepared to receive the holy (the color) and so must experience the abstinence and limitation of grisaille. The grisaille heightens the focus and transcendence of the barrier between the profane, everyday world and the sacred through limitation. The transition between the everyday and the holy is so disparate, the transition must be mediated.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The exterior of Jan Van Eyck’s “Dresden Triptych,” shows two figures, one on each door, painted in grisaille (see figure 9). As in many altar pieces, the exterior grisaille figures are meant to depict sculptures. These figures stand on pedestals, and the grisaille color palette is representative of marble sculptures; however, in the right door, a dove is shown flying towards the figure. The hovering dove surely cannot be a depiction of a sculpture, asking the question of how the grisaille is used as a representative tool.<sup>xxxix</sup> The grisaille exterior is a liminal space between painting, sculpture, and reality. The exterior is a liminal space of ambiguity and paradox that does not conform to traditional modes of representation. The altar piece is a paradoxical, transformative object that vacillates between painting and object through self-referential representation.

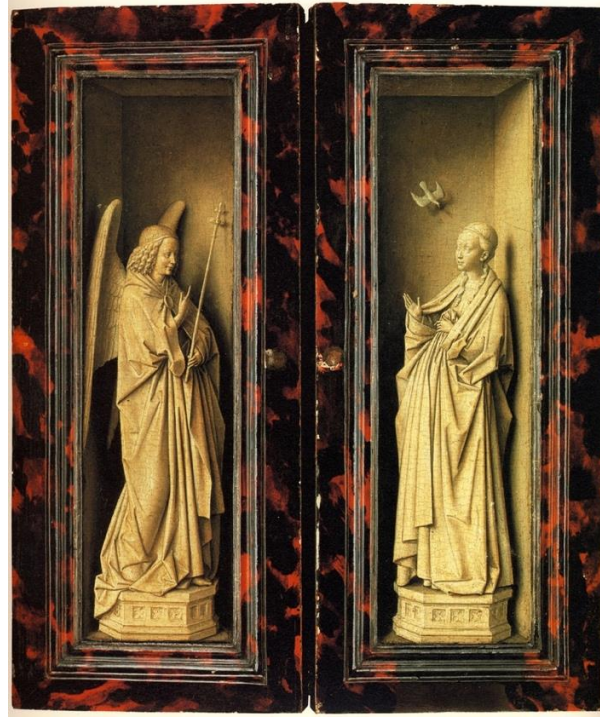


Fig. 9

Jan Van Eyck

*Dresden Triptych*, 1437

Oil on oak panel, 33.1 cm x 27.5 cm (center panel), 33.3cm x 13.6cm (wings)

Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden

From Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art, jhna.org

The use of grisaille acts to veil the window, mediating the experience of exteriority and interiority. The veiled window is a transitional, liminal space where ambiguous states of representation and paradoxes occur, “betwixt and between”<sup>xl</sup> the everyday and the holy, painting and object, color and colorlessness. Modes of limitation and liminality act as transitional veil to a transcendent state.

Luc Tuymans confronts subjects of modernist painting, the photograph, and the screen through paintings that are severely neutral in color (see figure 10). His brushstroke, short and direct, continuously runs horizontally to the picture plane, flattening the image and referencing the photograph and the screen. In *Luc Tuymans: Painting the Banality of Evil*, Helen Molesworth discusses Tuymans’ use of the photographic image and “...his concern for the very different *spatial and psychic* apparatuses of painting and photography. He does not merely paint from photograph or in relation to them; instead his paintings work against the spatial logics of both systems of representation.”<sup>xli</sup> Tuymans denies the expectations of representation of both the photograph and the painting, as well as the desire for completeness through the fragmented, flat, near colorless image (drained). His approach to the unlabored painting by working on a painting for one day, allows for a painting to be seen through to its ground where an illusion is not reached. We are left with the bare bones of painting, the neutralized color and narrow value range that comes from working wetly. Margaret Olin says “most paintings allow us to ‘lay down our gaze’ and indulge our ‘eye’ in the illusion of fullness.”<sup>xlii</sup> Tuymans doesn’t allow us any such

comfort, his restriction of color and image withhold access to the image; the loss of information is a mediation, the neutrality is an absence (loss).

Malevich's white on white painting shows a subtle tonal and chromatic variation of an off-kilter square painted on a square surface (see figure 11). His use of extremely limited color and the denial of the image shows his rejection of painting conventions: "The Neutral can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states. "To outplay the paradigm" is an ardent, burning activity."<sup>xliii</sup> Although it is hard edge modernism, Malevich's hand was not stingy with paint: the texture reveals paint scumbled across the canvas and the weave of the canvas showing through. The slight shifts in color and the softness of the texture read like light coming through a surface, a window. It is both painting and object, color and colorless. Both Tuymans and Malevich use limited color and form (loss of image, abstraction) as rejection of traditional modes of representation. Their colorlessness acts as a liminal space.



Fig. 10  
Luc Tuymans  
*Window*, 2004  
60 x 49.5 in  
Oil on canvas  
From Musees Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique,  
[fine-arts-museum.be](http://fine-arts-museum.be)

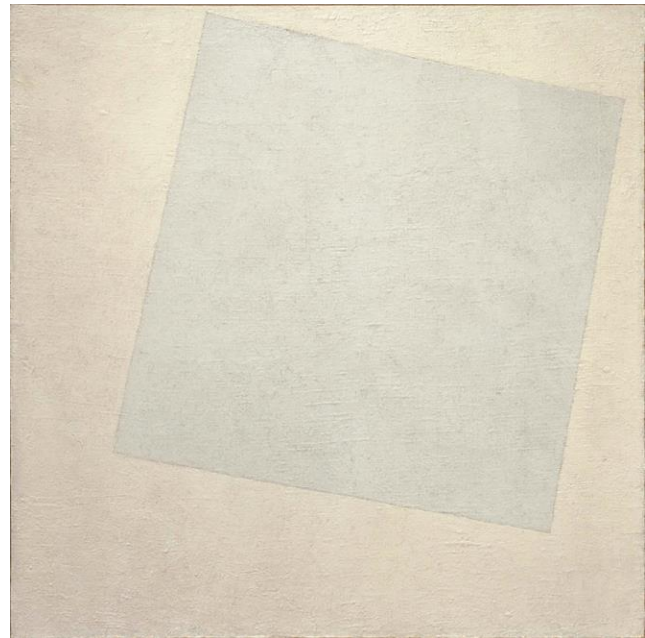


Fig. 11  
Kazimir Malevich  
*White on White*, 1918  
31¼ in x 31¼ in  
Oil on canvas  
From The Museum of Modern Art, [moma.org](http://moma.org)



## Light (Place and Time)

My paintings are withholding, stripped bare of accoutrements. Through this restraint, I ask the viewer to enter the contemplative and engage in introspective memory of time and space, “for there is no truth that is not tied to the moment.”<sup>xliv</sup> My works are of a specific time and place, located in personal narrative. The viewer enters specific personal narrative in a specific location although the subject matter is universal: “the right mix of emotion and distance.”<sup>xlv</sup> Individual experience, individual response. Anyone who has been in an apartment building or institutional space has an experience of these materials. The paintings depict an experience of the materials in time. Vermeer (the painter of light) creates a contemplative environment in which the viewer can focus on self-narrative. He illustrates how figures interact with interior light, creating a specific place and time (see figure 12). I offer an opportunity to react with the light and surroundings, place in time. The viewer becomes the subject of the painting.



Fig. 12  
 Johannes Vermeer  
*Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window*, c. 1657–1659  
 Oil on canvas  
 32 3/4 x 25 3/8 in.  
 Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister  
 (Old Masters Picture Gallery), Dresden  
 From Essential Vermeer.com



Giorgio Morandi, the Italian painter of still lifes of vases, bowls, and other such small items, created works that are wonderfully liminal (see figure 13). His palette was severely muted and his brush stroke was economical. Objects sit uncomfortably while a straight horizon line dissects the surface. He often increases tension through tangencies to disrupt spatial logic; objects sit tightly together, their edges aligning with each other and the horizon line. The lighting in his painting is diffused and atmospheric. They lack the detail and contrast that we expect to see in objects that are so near to us. The objects are intimate, but distant and absent. The neutral object translated into a work of art holds a psychology, anxiety, and an uncanny sensation. Morandi's paintings are anxious objects that wrestle with proximity, light, banality, and flatness.



Fig. 13

Giorgio Morandi

*Still Life*, 1954

Oil on canvas

26.5cm x 41cm

From Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts,  
University of East Anglia, [artuk.org](http://artuk.org)

Working from a photographic reference (captured light) allows me to live in a moment and translate from a sense of reality. It allows me to work at the slow pace of my hand and still capture a fleeting moment. Time and light are suspended, stretched out, eternal: “A photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real. Like a footprint or a death mask.”<sup>xlvi</sup> My paintings are a mediated state of reality, distant but intimate, hoping to embody an experience of light, place, and time.

*February 18, 2017*

I spend the afternoon at MomaPS1. I enter James Turrell's *Meeting* at 5 o'clock (see figure 14). The wood paneled room is perhaps 20 ft. square and crowded, people squeeze into the wood benches and lie across the floor. I sit in-between strangers on the bench, the back is tilted to the sky. The room is lit with white lights. In the middle of the ceiling is a bright blue square. I sit and stare upwards. The blue square looks like a projection, light projected on the ceiling. I can see no architectural evidence that it is a hole in the ceiling. A cloud passes through the square and my perception of space shifts: I see the exterior. I can hear the train running in the distance. I continue to stare. People shuffle around, talk, laugh, get bored and leave. Still staring, I am startled when a soft orange-pink light fades into the room. The light stays pink for what seems like a long time, ever so slowly, the orange-pink becomes more intense and the light saturates the room until it becomes so vivid the sky turns into a murky green (the sky looks like lake water). My sense of time, place, and material are confused yet specific. The light shifts into a neon purple, the sky turns black and white and I think I'm looking at a screen of an old film. In the transition to blue, the sky becomes a muddy yellow ochre. The light continues to shift colors on a loop, each time the sky's relation to the colored light changes as the sun goes down. I sit unmoving for an hour. The museum attendant kicks us out at closing time. I feel so reluctant to go, interrupted from my intense experience. When I leave the museum, the sky is somehow still blue, I am surprised that I was there an hour; it felt completely timeless.

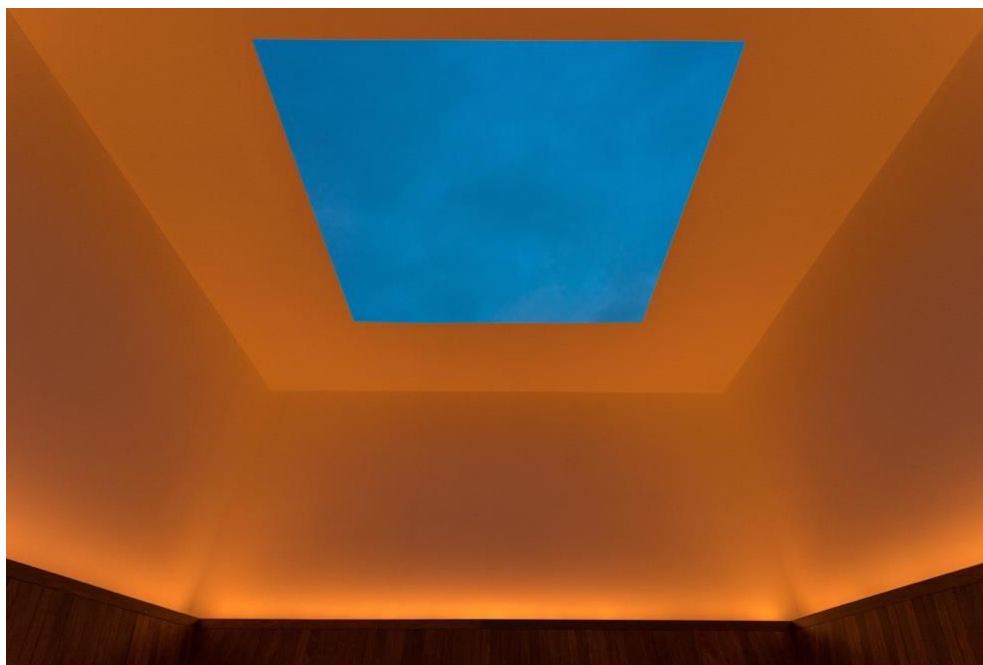


Fig. 14  
 James Turrell  
*Meeting*, 1980–86/2016  
 Light and space  
 From The Museum of Modern Art, moma.org

Brittany Jasin and I create a small exhibition of our works that both deal with the window. My blind paintings hang on the wall and her chiffon curtains cover the windows of the gallery (see figure 15). As light passes through Jasin's curtains, the room is affected with color. Her pink curtains and my pink blinds meet in a similar lighting situation. Different windows, same light: two disparate experiences of light and material merge. The works are exercises in experiential light, time, and place.

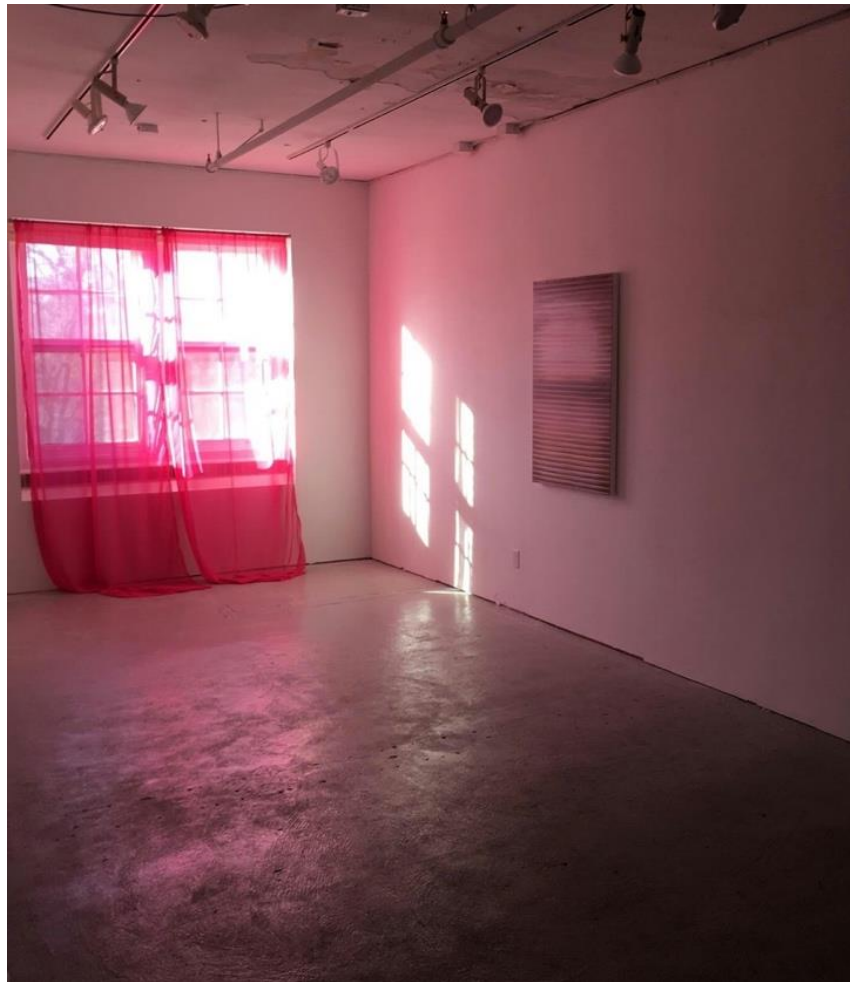


Fig. 15  
Brittany Jasin (left), Chloe West (right)  
Untitled installation, 2017  
From the artist

## Form: Painting and the Frame

### *The Frame, The Body*

Oil paint is the medium of my choice, a material that is itself transitional: both material and immaterial for paint both shows itself and hides. I explore the frame and two-dimensional surface of a painting through representation, questioning illusionism. I explore two disparate ways of dealing with the surface of a painting both as a window into another world and as a flat object existing in the same world as the viewer. Through narrow pictorial space, I deny the viewer access to fully enter the image, instead they remain outside as alienated onlookers. The paintings do not allow for any penetrating gaze when the image is compressed to the surface of the canvas: a *trompe l'oeil* homage. I create tension between illusion and flatness to bring attention to the frame and surface, dealing with formal concerns of painting, pictorial space, and the object-ness of the canvas.

Silvia Plimack Mangold is a painter whose work deals with pictorial space and illusionism, “testing against visual experience”<sup>xlvi</sup> as a commentary on painting (see figure 16). Her paintings often depict the everyday: paintings of linoleum tiles and wood floors fragmented by mirrors, rulers, or masking tape. She questions the frame by juxtaposing perspectival space and flatness in the same image, using *trompe l'oeil* to create a confusing materiality and pictorial space. Many of her paintings depict a ruler that rides the tangency of the edge of the canvas, creating tension between illusion and surface to bring attention to the frame. I share her formal concerns of painting in thinking through what a painting is, how we look at them, and how we deal with illusionistic space as well as the unromantic painting subject of banality.



Fig. 16  
 Silvia Plimack Mangold  
*Golden Rule on Light Floor, 1975*  
 Acrylic on canvas  
 24 x 30 in.  
 From: alexanderandbonin.com

I deal with the language of both representation and abstraction. The paintings are abstractions that reference a representation: neither/nor. The all-over composition of the standardized line is a subversive repetition:

That the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies does not imply that repetition itself ought to be stopped—as if it could be. If repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?<sup>xlviii</sup>

The repetition is uneasy, anxious, overbearing. The extreme repetition hints to the “cultural reproduction of identities” and regulatory production of space. My windows and repetitious blinds point to a question of standardized subjectivity.

The all-over composition turns the surface into a skin, the structure into a body: the painting itself becomes a standardized subject. Not only do the paintings relate to the viewer’s body, but become bodies of their own through their proximity in scale to actual bodies and their flesh tone colors. My work *Lovers (Dark Glasses)* is a diptych of two canvases that are the width and height of my body: 67” x 17” (see figure 17). By creating a work that is the scale of a body, the painting becomes an object and a body, an object that my body orients itself toward. They are objects that are perfectly suited to my body to paint: I repeat the width of my shoulders and height, the range of my body.



Fig. 17  
 Chloe West  
*Lovers (Dark Glasses)*, 2017  
 Oil on canvas  
 Diptych, 67 x 17 in. each  
 From the artist

As my subject matter is standardized, so is my hand: my style is no style. My paintings deal in limitation and absence, trying to find some sense of meaningful economy, if not secrecy. My economy is not in my process, for my paintings are layers of labor. Alain Robbe-Grillet deals in a similar sense of scarcity in his writing. *Snapshots* is a small book of several short entries, each story is a snippet of a situation which lacks an overarching narrative but uses highly detailed description. Robbe-Grillet manages to impart great specificity without giving away very much information; immense specificity with immense absence. By taking away the narrative and stylized language, Robbe-Grillet heightens the psychology and anxiety of the reader, forcing the reader to be active. By deconstructing the psychology of a character, the psychology of the reader is intensified. There is no certainty or conclusion. This is the way my paintings operate as well: I use no narrative although I use descriptive imagery and my hand is not highly stylized. The language and information I impart is limited but highly detailed, requiring the viewer to



remain attentive perhaps never receiving what they expect from a representational painting. Where language is limited, it becomes most meaningful, although Robbe-Grillet and I spend an inordinate amount of time to get there.

I think too of Agnes Martin's large paintings and the obedience and labor that her paintings required, seeking the perfect object (see figure 18). Her gallerist writes of her: "The paintings are meditations on innocence, beauty, happiness, and love. Agnes's painting invites the viewer to recognize states of perfection already extant within ourselves. There is no narrative, they offer no explanation, and they make no demands."<sup>xlix</sup> The deference that she exercises in a seemingly minimal aesthetic creates work that is tender and beautiful. While my lines remain anxious, Martin created repetitious, all-over compositions with transcendence, transcendence that arises from devotional repetition.

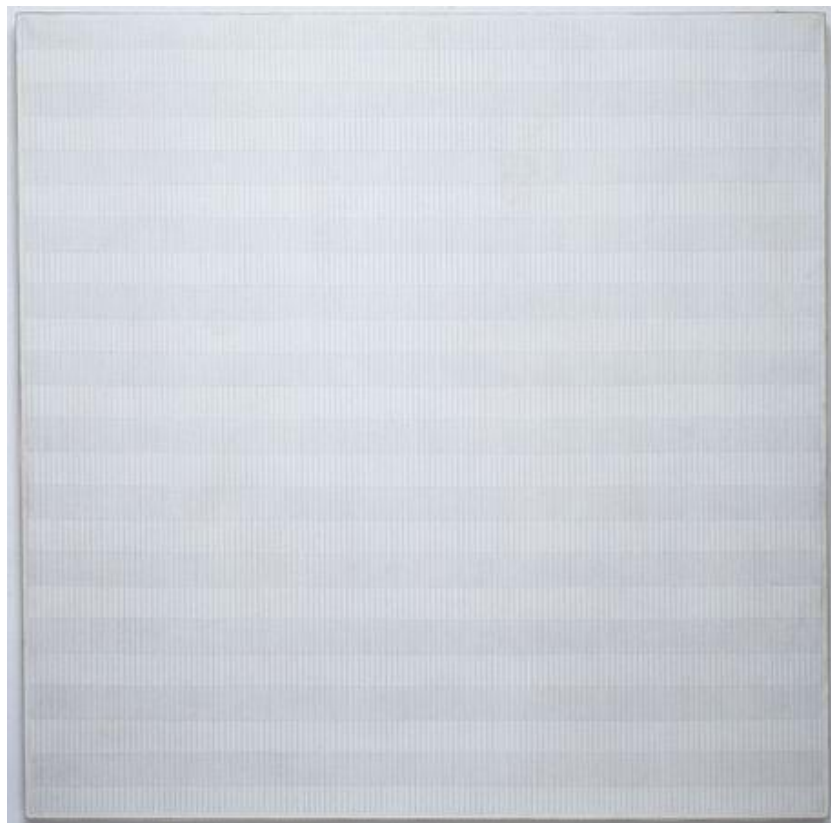


Fig. 18  
 Agnes Martin  
*The Tree*, 1964  
 Oil and pencil on canvas  
 72 x 72 in.  
 From The Museum of Modern Art, moma.org

## Here, There

### *Placelessness*

My paintings are of materials from generalized spaces which provoke a feeling of detachment and loneliness in me. These mundane objects and surfaces are ubiquitous in our built and rebuilt environment. The materials we use to create our world are homogenized and thus, we become displaced from any real sense of place, instead we inhabit ready-made spaces. As Bachelard describes the current home or apartment building and the psychological effects of living in such spaces:

Home has become mere horizontality. The different rooms that compose living quarters jammed into one floor lack of the fundamental principles for distinguishing and classifying the value of intimacy. But in addition to the intimate value of verticality, a house in a big city lacks cosmicity. For here, when houses are no longer set in natural surroundings, the relationship between house and space becomes an artificial one.<sup>1</sup>

The city home is separated from its environment, erasing its sense of place. By translating these manufactured skins into paintings, I am better able to organize the spaces that surrounds me and investigate the relationship of space, intimacy, and detachment.

Thomas Demand creates mundane consumerist environments out of cut paper and photographs the scene (see figure 19). The carefully constructed spaces are banal, everyday/everywhere. Immaculately crafted objects lack any trace of text or human interaction. They are labored, absent spaces; specific yet utterly detached from any real sense of place, humanity. Both Demand's and my work are intimately produced situations of placelessness.





Fig. 19  
Thomas Demand  
*Copyshop*, 1999  
C-Print  
72 ¼ x 118 ¼ in.  
From Matthew Marks Gallery, [matthewmarks.com](http://matthewmarks.com)

### *The Other of Choice*

While the subject matter is generalized and impersonal, the act of painting is intimate and tender. My laborious efforts to paint the mundane with care border on the absurd. The juxtaposition of intimacy and banality speaks to the inhabitation of such non-spaces. My works are a matter of proximity: I choose subjects that are ready at hand and near to me. The scope of distance applies not only to the subject matter as distant (absent, inert) but also as literal distance of the subject matter to my body. The subject is chosen from things that are near to me, it does not matter which tile I chose to paint, they are all the same: “This fatality involves Photography in the vast disorder of objects - of all the object in the world: why choose this object, this moment, rather than some other? Photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences...”<sup>li</sup> Each subject is not chosen to express the importance of that specific site: nothing has happened here, yet everything has happened here. The tension of the in-between is in the scope of distance.

Uta Barth is a contemporary photographer whose works focus on questions of the medium of photography through the gaze and subject. In the *nowhere near* series, Barth photographed a window in her home for a year (see figure 20). Barth photographs the banal, neutral spaces that just happen to surround her. Her choice of subject matter is situational and arbitrary. Similar to Barth’s work, my subject is a matter of proximity, “the choice of no choice”<sup>lii</sup> as Barth describes it. Her photographs effectively communicate the question of the suitable subject, addressing the mundane as a non-elevated theme; she has “engaged the notion of the photographic environment as opposed to the photographic subject.”<sup>liii</sup> Her approach to the medium of photography and the subject matter is conceptual: “In contrast to documentary and confessional modes of photography, Barth intentionally depicts mundane or incidental objects in nondescript surroundings in order to focus attention on the fundamental act of looking and the process of perception.”<sup>liv</sup> Barth defies general expectations of the photograph and subject matter, instead paying close attention to the meaning of the medium and the everyday.



Fig. 20  
Uta Barth  
*nowhere near (Untitled 99.11)*, 1999  
Chromogenic prints in artist frame  
Diptych, 35 x 90 in.  
From Uta Barth.net

## *Home*

When objects are ripped from their surroundings and translated into a painting, they are detached from context, furthering displacement. Paintings of tiles are uncannily disconnected from the original that they represent. My paintings are not fully rendered as simulations so that their distinct painterly quality and failure to assimilate totally with the object they represent creates another displacement. They are utterly misfit: their home is everywhere and nowhere.

The materials of banality do hold meaning to us: through material culture, surfaces impress themselves upon the subject. The surfaces and objects we live with, however liminal, represent us and affect our sense of space and memory. Material culture plays a role in forming collective and personal identity and our relation to spaces, both private and public. Through my painting practice, I find meaning in the meaningless. My displaced queer body seeks a home.

My works deal with home and displacement; they are lonely works of alienation and disconnection. My paintings are an exercise in beauty and banality, love and denial, entry and inaccessibility. I find interest in the tension of the in-between.

*“I am simultaneously and contradictory happy and wretched: ‘to succeed’ or ‘to fail’ have for me only contingent, provisional meaning...what inspires me, secretly and stubbornly, is not a tactic: I accept and I affirm, beyond truth and falsehood, beyond success and failure; I have withdrawn from all finality, I live according to chance.... Flouted in my enterprise, I emerge from it neither victor or vanquished: I am tragic.”*

-Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse

## Deference (Inert, Neutral)

*“The Neutral [is] the back, but a back that shows without attracting attention: doesn’t hide but doesn’t show.”*

-Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*

*“He does not show himself and shines. He does affirm himself and prevails. His work done, he does not attach himself to it, and since he does not attach himself to it, his work will remain.”*

-Tao Te Ching

In many ways my work is about neutrality: somewhere in-between representation and abstraction, style and non-style, painting and object...searching for a perceptual flicker, a “shimmer” of subtlety in a world of conflict, assertions, and oppressive definitions: “The reason the Neutral is difficult, provocative, scandalous: because it implies a thought of the indistinct, the temptation of the ultimate paradigm: that of the distinct and the indistinct.”<sup>lv</sup> I explore the Neutral as being nearly imperceptible, being “neither-nor,”<sup>lvi</sup> having “the right dose of otherness.”<sup>lvii</sup> My paintings are in a state of imminence, light passing, something about to happen, “time of the not yet....silere: the bud, the egg not yet hatched: before meaning.”<sup>lviii</sup>

The attitude of my work is of deference. My paintings ask the viewer to wait, perhaps anxiously: “The anxiety of waiting is not continuously violent; it has its matte moments; I am waiting, and everything around my waiting is stricken with unreality.”<sup>lix</sup> The paintings reside in a liminal space of imminence and uncanny unreality. They are slowly revealing works, never giving away too much at once, never taking an authoritative tone. They take time to get to know. My sensibility is a quiet rebellion against a world that is defined and confrontational. I seek a world that lives in nuance. In this way, I hope my paintings are giving, enduring.

My work is of the inert, of deference, of imminence. I devote myself to the task of painting, to create works that are marginal but tender. I look, and I paint.

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<sup>i</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: New York: British Broadcasting Corporation, Penguin, 1972), 47.

<sup>ii</sup> Helen Scalway, "The Contemporary Flâneuse: Exploring Strategies for the Drifter in a Feminine Mode," in *The Invisible Flâneuse: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Critical Perspectives in Art History (Manchester ; New York : New York: Manchester University Press ; distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2006), 2.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>iv</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>vi</sup> Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, 2014.

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